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SUBJECT: NEA PDAS JEFFREY DISCUSSES IRAN WITH PRESIDENT ALIYEV

REF: 29 SEPTEMBER 2006 BAHL-DERSE EMAIL

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Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (S) Summary: During his 12 October call on President Aliyev, NEA PDAS Jeffrey, accompanied by the Ambassador, encouraged Azerbaijan to support a unified international front in response to Iranian nuclear ambitions. Reviewing recent U.S. efforts to counter the Iranian nuclear threat, PDAS Jeffrey was also interested in learning how heightened tensions with Iran might affect U.S. friends and allies. Explaining Azerbaijan's complex relationship with Iran, Aliyev said that Iran was a threat to Azerbaijan with or without nuclear weapons. Expressing a desire to work with the U.S. on Iran, Aliyev cautioned that Iran's President Ahmadinejad had recently warned him that "we will attack the place from where we are attacked." Therefore, Aliyev said, it was very important that Azerbaijan clearly understands U.S. plans and intentions on Iran so that "we can be prepared." Aliyev also expressed concern about Iran's role in proliferation, arguing that Iran's military industries are very advanced. Aliyev described Iran as "united as never before" on the nuclear issue, noting Ahmadinejad's comment that he has "burned his bridges on this issue," and said that Iran felt "comfortable" that it could withstand U.S.-backed efforts to pressure the regime. While skeptical that U.S. multilateral or unilateral efforts would be capable of changing the Ahmadinejad regime's behavior, President Aliyev reaffirmed his country's "strategic partnership" with the U.S., stating that the U.S. "can count on us." End Summary.

Iran a "Headache" for Azerbaijan

¶2. (S) During an October 12 meeting with President Aliyev focused on Iran, visiting NEA PDAS Jeffrey, accompanied by the Ambassador, stated that the U.S. sees Iran as the greatest single threat to world security. Explaining that his trip's purpose was to brief friends and allies about recent U.S. efforts vis-a-vis Iran, PDAS Jeffrey also expressed an interest in President Aliyev's advice and counsel. President Aliyev said that Iran was a constant problem for Azerbaijan and a "headache" no matter what kind of regime is in power. He attributed this to the many connections between the two countries, to include a shared border and millions of ethnic Azeris living in Iran. President Aliyev said Iran doesn't care about diplomatic norms or normal behavior, often trying to interfere in other

countries' domestic affairs. However, Aliyev warned, destabilization in Iran could result in refugee inflows into Azerbaijan, a major concern from his standpoint as Iranians "are a very religious people." In this regard, Aliyev said that a ten percent change in Azerbaijan's population (due to refugee flows) would "change the situation in Azerbaijan." To counter this threat, President Aliyev said that Azerbaijan would "control" its entire border by 2008.

13. (S) Stating that some countries in the region do not see the Iranian nuclear threat as an urgent one, Aliyev attributed this view to the fact that they "are not potential targets." He said that the U.S. concern about the Iranian nuclear program was "understandable." Expressing his interest to work with the U.S. on Iran, Aliyev said that President Ahmadinejad had recently told him that "we will attack the place from where we are attacked." Therefore, Aliyev said that it was very important for Azerbaijan to have an understanding of what might happen to Iran so that "we can be prepared."

U.S. Efforts vis-a-vis Iran

14. (S) PDAS Jeffrey said that Iran's nuclear portfolio was not the only concern of the U.S.: Iran's support of terrorism, its human rights violations (to include those of ethnic Azeris), and its support of Hezbollah were others. Stating that the nuclear threat was the most important, PDAS Jeffrey also pointed out that an Iranian nuclear capability would also give Iran the ability to threaten neighbors with both conventional and/or asymmetric threats, with threats to Iranian neighbors who are partners and allies of the U.S. also being threats to the U.S. PDAS Jeffrey assured

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President Aliyev that the U.S. would proceed carefully with P5 1 efforts and in its efforts with other friends and allies. He outlined the U.S. interest in a graduated response, focusing on nuclear and missile programs first, with more generalized economic sanctions not currently on the table. PDAS Jeffrey said that absent support, unilateral or regional sanctions would not be effective. He also told President Aliyev that his influence with Russia to support U.S. efforts would be important. PDAS Jeffrey stressed that the U.S. was not seeking to overthrow the Ahmadinejad regime, only to change its behavior.

Iran "United as Never Before"

15. (S) President Aliyev said that Iranians were united on the nuclear issue - "united as never before" - and that it would be difficult to influence them. Aliyev told Jeffrey that Ahmadinejad had told him in a recent visit to Baku that "we burned all the bridges - we will not step back." Aliyev said that Iranians feel comfortable about the Security Council, knowing that China will veto any U.S. efforts. Aliyev said that Russia's leadership was concerned and had even told him that "we will not allow them to get nuclear weapons." Aliyev said, based on the information he was receiving, that it was difficult to believe that Iran would change its behavior. He also expressed concern that other countries - "whoever has money" - would also seek nuclear weapons, Iran becoming a proliferator and undermining world security.

16. (S) PDAS Jeffrey acknowledged President Aliyev's concerns. Speaking to the Chinese issue, PDAS Jeffrey said that the U.S. believes that Iran is not evaluating China correctly, especially after events in the DPRK. According to Jeffrey, U.S.-led sanctions would not bite deep, but would slow the nuclear program. As to Iranian enrichment efforts,

Jeffrey said that an arms embargo was possible if Iran did not cease its enrichment efforts and that such an embargo would affect Iran's arms purchases. PDAS Jeffrey stated that Ahmadinejad has his own problems internally, so the international community had to be committed to this track to maintain maximum pressure. Jeffrey also stated that the U.S. would consult with neighboring states.

Aliyev Skeptical

17. (S) President Aliyev noted a dichotomy in Iranian behavior. Using the example of the many Iranians who come to Azerbaijan, Aliyev said that once here, "they drink alcohol and the women don't even cover." Aliyev said that in Iran there was one "official" behavior and another unofficial behavior. Recounting his 2005 official visit to Iran, President Aliyev said that his impression of things in Iran was "not very optimistic" and that the people "looked suppressed." Despite this, Aliyev said that Iranians had a high tolerance for suppression and that a popular movement probably would not change things in Iran. As evidence, Aliyev pointed to the recent May 2006 ethnic Azeri protests and the fact that they had been unsuccessful in bringing about any betterment in the treatment of Iranian ethnic Azeris.

Aliyev on a Potential Arms Embargo

18. (S) Concerning an arms embargo, Aliyev said that Iran's military industries were very developed, more so than Pakistan's. He attributed this to Russian and Chinese technology and said that Iran has its own arms industry and was capable of producing its own submarines, planes, and rockets. As such, he did not know how effective a possible arms embargo would be. In this regard, Aliyev said that U.S. efforts would "not be easy."

"You Can Count On Us"

19. (S) PDAS Jeffrey said that Iran's population stands at 70 million, that it has a small economy, and that its military

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has weaknesses Jeffrey said that the key for frontline countries was to cooperate with the international community, highlighting efforts such as Azerbaijan's participation in the Partnership for Peace program. DAS Jeffrey underscored that the U.S. is willing to take risks for international security. President Aliyev then expressed his view that Iran is not isolated and that it has strong business relations with European countries such as Germany and France, Japan, and the Muslim world. Also, despite tensions with Arab countries, Aliyev said that he believed that they would also not seek to isolate Iran. He said that it would be difficult to influence Iran as there was no broad group with which to pursue political or economic sanctions. Aliyev again stated that Iran "feels comfortable." Aliyev added that the P5 1 format could be more helpful if it were transformed into a broader international approach. PDAS Jeffrey responded that the U.S. would seek a broad approach, that this would not be easy, although most countries do not want to see Iran with a nuclear weapon. Ending the meeting, President Aliyev said that Azerbaijan's "strategic partnership" with the U.S. covers "all areas," his final words being "you can count on us."

110. (S) Comment: President Aliyev unequivocally expressed his willingness to work with the U.S. on Iran. At the same time, given Iran's proximity to Azerbaijan and the many links, Azerbaijan is also clearly sensitive to the fallout of

any increased U.S./international pressure on Iran, especially given IRI bellicosity, as signified by Ahmadinejad's recent warning that Iran would "attack the place from where we are attacked." In this connection, Aliyev also underscored the importance of Azerbaijan being aware of U.S. plans and intentions for Iran, so that Azerbaijan can be prepared for repercussions of U.S. or allied actions. We should build on PDAS Jeffrey's visit and U/S Burns' discussions with Foreign Minister Mammadyarov at UNGA (ref) to deepen our dialogue with Azerbaijan on this significant threat. End Comment.

11. (U) PDAS Jeffrey did not have the opportunity to clear this message.

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